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MEASURING THE RESULTS OF A MODERN LANGUAGE EXAMINATION

The customary modern language examination paper of high school or college is composed of diverse subject matter. It is of interest to the teacher to know definitely how his pupils react to the different parts of such a paper. Such knowledge may enable him to determine in the future: first, how much weighting should be given to similar questions, and secondly, how much time or stress should be devoted in the class to the various subjects comprising the paper.

To be sure, when one reads fifty or one hundred examination papers, one obtains a general impression concerning the most conspicuous reaction of the pupils, be it positive or negative. But such a general impression is no reliable guide. It contains no definite information and certainly gives no comparative knowledge. It is advisable, therefore, that the achievements of pupils on the various portions of a given paper should be reduced to figures. Such figures, as we shall presently see, may be of very practical value.

It was for the purpose of determining the relative difficulty of the various questions constituting an elementary French examination paper, or, what amounts to the same thing,—to determine the reactions of pupils to such a paper, that the following investigation was undertaken.

The paper in question covered the subject matter contained in the first twenty-two lessons of Fraser and Squair's "Shorter French Course" also phonetic transcription as given on pages XXV to XXVII of that book, and it presupposed a thorough familiarity with the following stories in Guerber's "Contes et Legendes, 1^{re} Partie": "Les Trois Ours," "Les Quatre Saisons," "Le Vrai Hertier," and "La Ville Submergée." The examination was taken by first year high school pupils of both sexes, three days after they had finished and reviewed the course.

The results of this investigation are based on the tabulation of the grades attained by 250 pupils on each of the several questions and sub-questions constituting the test, which was composed of the following subject matter:

I—(10 units)

Traduisez en anglais:

Un marchand de corail offrit d'acheter les perles, et lui donna une bonne somme d'argent. Cet argent permit à Pierre de donner une excellente éducation à tous ses enfants, et surtout à Godefroi qui en profita bien.

Il alla à l'école et étudia beaucoup de choses, mais les leçons de patience, et de persévérance étaient les plus précieuses de toutes. Il ne les oublia jamais, et quand il fut très âgé il disait souvent à ses petits enfants: "Il ne faut jamais désespérer. Dieu fait notre fortune de nos infortunes. Les choses qui paraissent impossibles à l'homme sont possibles à Dieu, car rien ne Lui est impossible."

II—(a, 24 units)

Traduisez en français:

1. Hasn't Mr. Leduc a large house? No, sir, Mr. Leduc's house is not large; it is small but pretty.

2. Do the pupils listen to the teacher? Yes, they listen to her; she is explaining the lesson to them.

3. The postman leaves the letters in a box at the door. My father thanks the maid when she brings him his letters.

4. What do your sisters study at school? They study French and speak it easily.

5. I want some tea; do you want any? No, I have some yet.

6. Children are happy everywhere. Even without money and without friends they are happy.

(b, 16 units)

7. Who is in the barn? It is my father who is selling the wheat that is there to the miller.

8. What is in the other room? There are many beautiful things there, but there are no pictures.

9. When the south wind blows, the flowers grow and the fields are green.

10. Where are the apples which you have gathered? I have been looking for them under the trees.

III—(a, 11 units)

Conjuguez au présent de l'indicatif, perdre.

Continuez: n' ai-je pas semé?

(b, 10 units)

Traduisez en français:

1. neither pens nor pencils.
2. most children.
3. is there any?
4. a straw hat.
5. enough bread.
6. he had two.
7. she gives me.
8. we speak to him.
9. sweet pears.
10. small white snowflakes.

(c, 10 units)

Donnez le féminin de: 1. long, 2. blanc, 3. gris, 4. bref, 5. sec.

Donnez le pluriel de: 1. le ciel, 2. le nez, 3. le bal, 4. le jeu, 5. le travail.

IV—(10 units)

Répondez en français:

1. Qu'est-ce que la petite fille prit dans la maison des trois ours et que goûta-t-elle?
2. Que dit un jour la méchante fille à sa mère?
3. De quoi les habitants de Stavoren étaient-ils fiers?
4. Quelle fut la première pensée de Julien en arrivant dans sa ville natale?
5. Qu'est ce que la fourmi faisait au temps chaud?

V—(a, 5 units)

Écrivez la fable, La Cigale et la Fourmi.

(b, 4 units)

Donnez une transcription phonétique de:

1. Son frère est mon cousin.
2. Qui est l'ami de votre frère?

The questions were scaled by the head of the French Department, and eight instructors were assigned to mark the blue books. Each instructor marked a specific question or part thereof through the entire number of papers. The sum of credits thus given constituted the final examination mark.

To give a definite answer to the question of relative difficulty in its broad sense, the results obtained by the 250 pupils in each question or division thereof, were tabulated, and each separate sum was divided by the product of the above number and the maximum value of the particular question under consideration. This gave the percentage of accuracy attained by all pupils on each question or part thereof. These results appear in the last vertical column of Table I. It might be added that the average per cent. of accuracy for all questions was 55. All figures were taken to the nearest unit.

To obtain finer results, however, the 250 blue books were divided into groups based on the final examination mark. The first group contained all papers the examination grades of which ranged from 11 to 19; the second group was composed of papers the values of which ranged from 20 to 29; and so on up to the group of papers marked from 80 to 89, and finally 90 plus. Nine groups were thus formed. Then the achievements of the pupils in each of these groups were examined in the same manner as before in order to see how they reacted to each of the several questions.

Table I gives the actual average grade that the pupils in each of the nine groups attained on the entire examination. Underneath these grades appear the per cent. of accuracy that they attained in each question or sub-division thereof.

TABLE I

PER CENT. ACCURACY ATTAINED ON EACH QUESTION

| Groups | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | Per cent. based on 250 papers |
|-------------------------------------|-----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|--|
| Av. Grade on Exam. = | | 16 | 24 | 34 | 45 | 53 | 65 | 75 | 84 | 90 | 55 |
| Questions | | | | | | | | | | | |
| I | | 15 | 23 | 33 | 42 | 54 | 57 | 67 | 78 | 87 | 52 |
| II | (a) | 11 | 28 | 34 | 47 | 60 | 72 | 80 | 90 | 93 | 60 |
| | (b) | 1 | 6 | 11 | 19 | 27 | 54 | 68 | 84 | 88 | 29 |
| III | (a) | 35 | 35 | 54 | 60 | 70 | 78 | 84 | 80 | 94 | 68 |
| | (b) | 19 | 27 | 34 | 52 | 59 | 66 | 77 | 86 | 92 | 60 |
| | (c) | 25 | 30 | 43 | 55 | 53 | 63 | 71 | 86 | 90 | 58 |
| IV | | 15 | 20 | 27 | 37 | 48 | 53 | 64 | 69 | 80 | 47 |
| V | (a) | 33 | 20 | 54 | 67 | 77 | 83 | 87 | 94 | 97 | 72 |
| | (b) | 9 | 31 | 25 | 32 | 55 | 64 | 70 | 83 | 90 | 52 |
| Number of papers in each group = | | 12 | 10 | 28 | 52 | 41 | 38 | 38 | 28 | 3 | 250 |

The next step was to take the first eight of the above groups and to put them into three larger classes on the following bases: First, those pupils who failed to pass the examination so badly that they had to take the course over again. These are the pupils whose examination average ranged from 10 to 39: (Groups 1, 2, & 3). Second, both those pupils who failed to pass the examination but whose recitation average enabled them to continue with the course, and those who passed with an average of less than 60. This group contains all papers ranging in value from 40 to 59: (Groups 4 & 5). The third group is composed of the papers of values from 60 to 89. It contains the upper third of the class: (Groups 6, 7, & 8). Group 9 was omitted because there is not a sufficient number of papers in it. Table II shows the relative difficulty of the several questions based on this grouping.

TABLE II
PER CENT. ACCURACY ATTAINED ON EACH QUESTION

| Groups | | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|----------------------------------|-----|----|----|-----|
| Av. Grade on Exam. = | | 28 | 49 | 73 |
| Questions | | | | |
| I | | 28 | 48 | 66 |
| II | (a) | 27 | 53 | 81 |
| | (b) | 8 | 23 | 67 |
| III | (a) | 46 | 65 | 81 |
| | (b) | 34 | 52 | 76 |
| | (c) | 36 | 54 | 72 |
| IV | | 23 | 42 | 61 |
| V | (a) | 42 | 71 | 87 |
| | (b) | 23 | 45 | 71 |
| Number of papers in each group = | | 50 | 93 | 104 |

CONCLUSIONS

An examination of the figures in Tables I and II reveals the following facts:

1. Question I was well suited to the ability of the pupils inasmuch as each group attained on this question approximately the same average that it achieved on the entire paper.

2. Part (a) of Question II proves to be somewhat easy for the upper half of the students, while part (b) is unusually difficult for all but the upper third. This is as we might expect, since Question II deals with composition of progressive difficulty. Part (a) being based on the first fourteen lessons of the grammar is within the

grasp of even the less brilliant pupils, and proves to be very easy for the brighter ones. But part (b), dealing with more intricate points of grammar, leaves the poorer students floundering in seas of error. Nevertheless, the extremely low percentage of accuracy attained by the pupils in part (b) compels one to seek the cause. Was the teacher who marked this question too strict, or was the subject gone over too hastily in class? It might be said that in this particular instance the cause of the great disparity was readily found—insufficient time had been devoted to the study of the subject matter covered by this part of Question II.

3. Part (a) of Question III is far too simple for the pupils, as the figures show. Either the material composing it should not appear on such an examination, or else very few points should be given for it. Parts (b) and (c) of this Question appear to be well suited for the students.

4. The low attainment of all pupils on Question IV raises several queries. Is the poor showing due to the inability of the children to understand the question, or to their inability to express simple ideas in French; or does it show a lack of familiarity with the contents of the stories, or insufficient practice in French conversation in the class room, or are they incapable of expressing an idea or a fact in simple language altogether? The results are probably due, in various degrees, to all these factors combined.

5. Since the only objective factors involved in producing efficiency in the subject matter constituting part (a), Question V, were time and drill, the successful achievement of all groups in this case shows that sufficient time had been given to the memorization of the poem. In this instance the groups reacted positively and true to their class, to paraphrase a biological expression. Finally, the poor attainment of the lower third pupils on part (b), Question V, shows that they shirked their home work in phonetic transcription. It does not mean that they have an absolutely weaker retentive power than the upper third, for it will be seen that in the purely memory work—part (a), Question V—they attained a higher percentage than on the entire examination paper. The only conclusion is that their lower attainment in phonetic transcription is due to shirking. This too, is what we might expect from individuals of low intelligence—they are deficient in endurance and patience. If they cannot see the immediate results or instantly reap the fruits of an effort, they will not make it.

The following curves—Figure I—give a graphic representation of both the results contained in Table II and the average attained by all pupils as given in the last vertical column of Table I. The curves are drawn with reference to a base which represents the average attained by each group on the entire examination. The units above or below this base line indicate the extent to and the direction in which the several groups varied in each question and sub-question, from their respective examination average.

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